

2011

Narrative drawers: Reconsidering familiar precedents of drawer furniture

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Narrative Drawers

Reconsidering Familiar Precedents of Drawer Furniture

By

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences,
School for American Crafts, in Candidacy for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts,
Woodworking and Furniture Design

Graduate Thesis Approval Committee: Rich Tannen, Chief Advisor; Andy Buck; Don Arday

Rochester Institute of Technology

Rochester, New York

May 2011

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“If we, citizens, do not support our artists, then we sacrifice our imagination on the altar of crude reality and we end up believing in nothing and having worthless dreams.”¹

Yann Martel, *Life of Pi*

Thesis Abstract

This written thesis represents the culmination of several years of research, conceptual development, and studio work and accompanies an exhibition of furniture work, titled *Narrative Drawers: Reconsidering Familiar Precedents of Drawer Furniture*, which was held in the Bevier Gallery at Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, New York, from April 24 – May 10, 2006. A portion of this research directly results from my efforts under a 2005 Graduate Research Grant awarded by the Center for Craft, Creativity and Design, Hendersonville, North Carolina.² Four original pieces of furniture were made for this exhibition: *Tradition*, *Perforated Chest of Drawers*, *Private Exhibition*, and *Private Life*. These works are variations on several types of drawer furniture: a Queen Anne style side table, a Modern style chest of drawers, a novel, revisionist clothesline, made compact for a home interior in a chest of drawers format, and a tabletop version of a Hadley style chest-over-drawer. The focus is on drawer furniture because of its rich symbolic potential. Considerable effort was made to develop these four furniture pieces into a cohesive body of work, and so the work is structured using themes. Four themes evolved in the making of this thesis: narrative, surface decoration, remarks on historical precedents, and the subversion of functional expectations. After establishing the basis for cohesiveness and relevance in studio furniture making, this writing examines the successes and weaknesses of the individual works, of their cohesiveness with the themes and each other, and of the exhibition in the gallery setting. Finally, the influence of this thesis upon my future endeavors in furniture making is envisioned. Though I greatly enjoy each individual piece, I suggest that this body of work and exhibition fail the test of cohesion. I trace the problem back to the thesis proposal. I now see clearly how more control over my subject would greatly improve my work's cohesiveness and clarity.

Thesis Proposal

As Submitted September 9, 2005

I intend to build for my graduate thesis a body of furniture that challenges the archetypes of containment furniture. Containers exist in many forms, and yet, at the same time, their furniture archetypes are completely commonplace in our society: chests of drawers, cabinets, boxes, and chests are typical examples. I will, therefore, attempt to explore some of these variations in an effort to rethink the obvious. It is not enough for me to simply make more of the same ordinary objects: I wish to explore containment as a vehicle for conceptualization.

I hope to produce a body of work that reflects a range of approaches to furniture making and design, from a personal, non-objective approach to a practical, utilitarian approach, without holding to any one method. My primary material is wood, but this does not exclude the use of any other material. My intentions are to employ any appropriate materials and processes for furniture making.

My initial investigation will focus on a particular container archetype, the drawer, specifically an underwear drawer. I will examine privacy, secrecy, and concealment through this series as I conceptualize how and why people store or hide their undergarments. Continuing investigations will follow a review by my Thesis Committee.

I. Context Relevance and Precedent in the Practice of Studio Furniture

It is reasonable to expect that, in making a body of work for public exhibition, a maker would have some sense of the cultural tone or movement within his or her chosen media, if not of the broader arts and crafts, and that he or she would then apply this understanding toward making new work. We might expect this forethought from a maker because any creatively relevant work would likely not manifest from a vacuum, but from an applicable source within society—having one's finger on the pulse of culture, as it were. We might also expect that the resulting work would be infused with a perceivable significance or content, something to be taken away and pondered. A viewer could then hold the resulting body of work as a kind of cultural mirror to society, gaining some new comprehension or gleaning some special commentary about the culture we inhabit.

In the field of studio furniture, the best examples currently on display succeed in capturing some essence of culture into a cohesive narrative, whether through personal experience, conceptual ideology, or historical dialogue. These works excite us and give us something to talk about. They inspire us to make our own work, and they establish the standard to which we compare future works. These bodies of work are greater than the individual works alone, bound together by a cohesiveness that is at once complex and complete. It is through the aggregate of the total exhibited body that the work can achieve its definitive meaning, like separate chapters in a novel that, when read together, produce a transcendent result. So then what makes a cohesive body of work? What qualities must one contain? Here the answers are not complicated. The works would ideally show a focused intent, a consistent conceptual or thematic significance, a unity of material approaches or techniques, or perhaps a commonality in collective appearances. The various pieces of work should exist together for a determined reason, and that reason should be transparent to many who view the body together; in other words, it should have relevance, without which the effort may simply be hollow and self-indulgent. Ultimately, the collected work should capture a clear vision of the maker at that given moment.

With enough conviction and perhaps a little luck, a maker might establish a cumulative artistic identity, a reputation, which would then add to the larger framework

upon which studio furniture is defined. This is a long-standing pattern in the arts of making and showing, which was eventually adopted by studio crafts in the 1960's when makers began striving to establish themselves in gallery contexts rather than as local or regional makers of household wares and furnishings.³ For studio furniture this pattern follows from several exceptional generations and a long list of makers, many of whom continue to shape this craft form by adding inspiration upon inspiration. Leading contemporary makers like John Eric Byers⁴ and Judy Kensley McKie⁵ have established their creative identities through the regular presentation of consistently professional and personally powerful work. These and many other established makers have set the tone for showing the kind of studio furniture seen in today's market.

While listing what makes a body of work cohesive is a simple task, executing that work is another endeavor entirely, and yet that is the work of a studio furniture maker. If a body of work is to be relevant to our cultural progression, then it must at minimum be a cohesive one. Arguably a complete body of work may tell a more nuanced narrative than a stand-alone work, and certainly more so than an incongruent grouping of disconnected pieces. With the complete body a maker can delve into the heart of a matter and, in this way, may unite the patterns of her intentions. With this evolved clarity of intention, the maker may develop her cohesive narrative and test the mode of her work's relevance to the arts and to society. When a maker exhibits a cohesive body of work, she says to the viewing world that she is thoughtful and clear of intention, that her work is not haphazard but certain. All works deemed important, after all, in any creative field—whether of craft, design, or art—possess this certainty, in part, because of the relevance they reflect from their originating cultures. But it is less important whether that relevance is preexisting in the culture or is established by the work itself. These works tap into the zeitgeist, ultimately becoming emblematic of the prevailing spirit and aspirations of a society. They help define who we are as a civilization because they provide context for our actions, our behaviors, and our mythologies.

While developing cohesiveness in a body of work is a great challenge for a maker, so too is securing the relevance of that work within its parent culture. As we viewers weigh the relevance of a given craft exhibition, it is useful to consider its relevance in two distinct forms: functional relevance and cultural relevance. Functional relevance is established when a series of works are linked by way of their functional usages in a manner that describes their common usefulness, like an exhibition of side chairs for waiting rooms or of cabinets of curiosities, for example. In this way, a maker effectively validates the relevance

of a body of work through a kind of exhibited critical mass, as if saying, “these works matter because they exemplify a particular functional archetype.” Realizing functional relevance is made simpler by the very fact that successful furniture archetypes are long established in our society and are, thus, easily referenced: tables, chairs, cabinets, and chests, for example, are all functional types with empirically resolved forms, conceived to accommodate our human anatomy in exact ways. Archetypes do not specify the appearance of the furniture, but rather the abstract premise of a form as it performs its purpose. For instance, the archetypical form of a chair is simply an elevated surface for sitting and a back support. Notice that this description does not dictate materials, thicknesses, shapes, or any other concrete formal details. These common types can then be further partitioned into more specific, narrowly defined functional variations. For example, *chairs* might include dining chairs, lounging chairs, office and work chairs, and so on, each with a unique set of design parameters. With the archetypes at hand, a furniture maker may then choose from these established reference points, or precedents, to begin developing his or her aesthetic variations. A good example of how this can be done comes from Roy McMakin,⁶ furniture designer and artist, in whose exhibition, “A Slat-back Chair” at the University Art Gallery, San Diego State University, the chair becomes a representation of its archetype. McMakin composes his pieces in situations in the gallery, like symbolic forms, to speak about his own life and relationship to furniture. The chairs in this exhibition are simple, almost fundamental in form and construction, with a basis in Craftsman and Mission historical styles. Their simplicity creates an impression that McMakin intended them to appear pared down closely to their given archetype. Tina Yapelli, Director of University Art Gallery, explains McMakin’s intentions in the exhibition catalog:

Words [in his titles] like ‘untitled’ and ‘plain’ convey a matter-of-fact neutrality that corresponds to McMakin’s desire for an unbiased reading of his chairs. Shunning the various associations that more loaded titles might impose, the artist aims to focus the viewer on the intrinsic nature, the fundamental ‘chairness’ of his works. When McMakin first chose ‘simple’ to identify his quintessential slat-back chair, he intended that the unassuming adjective would refer directly to the object’s unadorned and useful style.⁷

Interestingly, while we may be initially inclined to interpret these works according to their “fundamental” functionality, we are invited to consider them on conceptual grounds as well. Nonetheless, though these works are rich with symbolism and memory, they are first

understood through their common function, seating. We understand their relevance to our lives and our society when we recognize their common function.

At times, studio furniture makers will attempt challenges to formal furniture archetypes, making pieces that propose to subvert or distort our socially held expectations of typical forms by calling into question their intended functions. While these attempts may challenge our thinking about how we use and live with furniture, so fundamental are the archetypes from which those works are drawn that they are rarely removed from the form—to do so would, instead, be to work more in the arena of sculpture than of furniture, to leave the archetype behind rather than respond according to it. Maker Wendell Castle^s has built a long and prolific career pursuing this boundary and has inspired new generations of studio makers to attempt the same feat. The forms of his contemporary work are not always straightforwardly functional. Often they require some investigation and interpretation, appearing initially as sculptural forms rather than functional types; nonetheless, they are created to perform as furniture, and so can never quite let go of the archetype in question.

Archetypes are able to persist in their given forms because our socially held expectations of them remain constant. A dining chair allows for sitting at a dining table, and unless our culture alters its practice of dining in any significant way, such as moving toward sitting on floor mats like in traditional Japanese households, then the dining chair archetype remains relevant. Social factors do not readily change, not without upheaval, and so we can expect these archetypes to continue to guide the designs of furniture makers. Furthermore, any attempts to remake these given archetypes or to, perhaps, even invent new forms are judged according to the primary functional reference types. Both makers and users alike draw from a common cultural experience to comprehend a piece of furniture, and so the realization of functional relevance is, effectively, made simpler by the aggregate of precedent. In other words, the treatment of function in a work need not be revelatory to be relevant; it simply needs to be applied consistently.

If we accept the hypothesis that our furniture reflects our social values—that, for example, the form follows the function, or the ornament mirrors one's social standing—then we must also accept that these forms can not be complete or final. Our culture is not constant, and neither are the precedents of furniture making that derive from this culture. Where archetypes are fundamental, precedents are fluid. Archetypes are the typical or model examples of an object. We understand these types through a collective acceptance of their merits. In the case of furniture, those merits are the idealized solutions that achieve a

particular physical or social function, such as sitting at a dining table. But precedents are formulated through collective responses to particular problems. They strive for the ideals established by the archetypes, but those ideals of form and particulars of function are in no way conclusive. Archetypes represent the most elemental scenario, but also the most unspecified one. The archetype can only ever be a starting point toward investigating furniture, not an end. And so, if our culture is in a state of change, then so too is our furniture and the precedents through which it evolves. Designers and makers may find occasions to reconsider these precedents, thereby adding to our cultural progression. After all, reexamining familiar things is a healthy exercise, because some things we take for granted, and some we simply never consider, which is a tragedy in this profession.

Demonstrating cultural relevance is a more demanding task. It may be no surprise that achieving functional relevance comes more naturally than realizing cultural relevance in the process of designing and making furniture. Where functional relevance rests more with how well the maker develops a given furniture archetype over a number of pieces, the culturally relevant body of work succeeds by representing and reflecting any number of cultural concerns that capture our public imagination. It should condense not only aesthetic concerns, but also symbolic meanings, intuitive reasoning, personal histories, and, possibly even, popular (or decidedly unpopular) viewpoints into an effective presentation. A maker must give us, as viewers, something more to talk about than simply how well a furniture piece works. In the public arena of the gallery exhibit, a maker may offer us a glance into the previously described cultural mirror on society, in which we might see something of ourselves, of the maker himself, or of the era we inhabit. In this chosen role, the exhibiting maker serves as both decoder and representative of our common cultural progression. In a culturally relevant body of work, metaphorical dots are connected and patterns emerge—this is what it means to have one's finger on the pulse of society. A principle practitioner with great success in this pursuit is maker and educator, Wendy Maruyama.⁹ Her furniture often develops as a response to her travels through various countries such as Japan, Korea and China, France, and England, as well as to her travels around the United States. The resulting work is rich with content, drawing from memory, history, gender identity, ethnicity, and nationality, among other culturally rooted topics, and at times refers directly to pop culture iconography. In her work we observe the many facets of who she is, how she views herself, and where furniture and culture can intersect, efforts that are deeply relevant to both studio furniture and to society in general.

The issue of relevance in studio furniture has particular import in today's practice because the profession appears to be enduring a kind of crisis of identity: Its relevance to society is at stake. A debate over the role of studio crafts in the broader pantheon of the arts rules the conversation today, and yet, despite this prevailing climate of uncertainty, dedicated furniture makers continue to make—furniture makers are naturally an optimistic crowd. Even still, a perception of marginalization looms over the field, as with much of craft, which at times can encumber the forward momentum of studio furniture in its pursuit for wider recognition.¹⁰ The expectation from enthusiasts here is that functional art, decorative art, and craft are equally as important as the more strictly conceptual, figurative, and abstract sculptural arts, yet somehow they do not enjoy the same degree of public acknowledgement. The issue is an economic one, to be sure—furniture makers need to make a living—but it is also an aesthetic one, a sociological one, an educational one, and a practical one. Without doubt, the values of craft are deeply embedded in the practice of studio furniture making, but craft, while noble, is also personal, time-consuming, idiosyncratic, and sometimes economically untenable. While, ironically, many of these aspects of making could easily be contextualized as strengths rather than weaknesses, all present challenges to correcting craft's poor public image: a public that is closed to the intellectual accomplishment of a work of studio furniture may not care to appreciate the workmanship involved in its creation; and if crafts are not viewed in the same manner of respect as fine (functionless) art, then they fail before they even begin to attempt to cast their influence. Indeed studio furniture makers must persist through many challenges in maintaining their active careers. Among the most immediate of these challenges are the loss and retraction of representing galleries for furniture, the lack of representing museums, a shrunken audience at retail craft shows, an uneducated public to the merits of studio craft, and the prevalence of cheaper, manufactured alternatives to one-of-a-kind furniture; but the naked reality is that craft is battling history. The momentum for studio craft that built up through the latter twentieth century appears to have waned into the early twenty-first. No matter how active its practitioners are in educating and promoting their work to the public, studio furniture is struggling to become a relevant leader in the arts today. Similarly, regardless of the intellectual and academic progress forged by the curation and writings of academic supporters like Edward S. Cooke¹¹ and Glenn Adamson¹² in establishing studio furniture as a relevant endeavor in the arts, the American public appears little wiser of its value nor any more enthusiastic for its presence. Whether the cycle of popular tastes will eventually turn to favor studio crafts again is yet unknown.

Andrew Glasgow provided me with his perspective on this subject. I spoke with him in Asheville, North Carolina in the summer of 2005, when he was still executive director of the Furniture Society. In response to my question, “Is (the current state of craft) really a problem of promotion and public education?” he answered,

My theory is, if it's really public education, if that's the issue: have the water droplets that have hit the surface from the American Craft Council, from the Furniture Society, from every freakin' local museum known to man, from the magazines that fill up an entire bin at Barnes & Nobles on craft, woodworking, ceramics, whatever, all the books at Barnes & Nobles about crafts, hobbies, art, that are out there—if all of that has made no more dent than it appears to have made, it's truly scary. Because, I think, what that means is that a whole lot of money has been spent for very little return. And then the question that follows from my perspective is: What would it have been like if no money had been spent, and would it have been appreciably different? Or would the same few hundred or few thousand people have been artistically inclined and out there looking and buying no matter what?¹³

The prospect of endeavoring to create relevant studio work appears grim in this lonely and unforgiving context. A maker cannot help but be mindful of this condition in developing his work, yet he must also ignore its negating pull. After all, making is, in part, an act of devotion and love, which naturally challenges any economic gain from the efforts involved; nonetheless, it clearly is not a requirement of making one-of-a-kind furniture that it be created in a vacuum of appreciation. This point begs the question: how should a studio furniture maker position his work today?

To begin to answer that question, consider the following two presentations on the state of contemporary craft in America, and note the way that each addresses the difficulties faced by studio professionals. The first presentation occurred in 2004, the second in 2008. Both describe great obstacles and raise difficult questions about the future of professional craft. Both concern studio furniture's struggle with social relevance today.

In the summer of 2004 I attended the Furniture Society conference held in Savannah, Georgia. There I saw a presentation by Carmine Branagan, then Executive Director of the American Craft Council (ACC), entitled “Designing a Public Conversation for Craft.” In her presentation she outlined the present state of contemporary craft, drawing her insight from several different professional panels and studies. The ACC's analysis describes that the general public perceives craft as “hippie, brown and itchy, happy hands at home, relegated to the gift shop, folk art, not serious, backward-looking,

boring, nostalgic,” and that this perception results in the public’s inability to discern the value of craft. This language is in contrast to the public’s opinion of design, which, according to Branagan’s presentation, is elevated as “contemporary, relevant, and cool” and has ownership of the term, “functionality.” This glaring contrast between terms points toward the conclusions that the profession of “craft lacks cultural validation,” “is not renewing itself in traditional ways,” and has no “promotional apparatus” in place as do the fields identified by design or by art. At the same time, Branagan reported that the ACC observes, “there has been a quite distinct recent shift from ‘craft-art’ to ‘craft-design.’” This shift reflects more than a semantic variation. It indicates a broad change in the nature of the work itself toward more universal themes, forms, and functions—think less one-of-a-kind and more mass-appeal.¹⁴

In this second example, gallerist, curator, and writer, Garth Clark, delivered a lecture at the Museum of Contemporary Craft in Portland, Oregon titled “How Envy Killed the Crafts Movement: An Autopsy in Two Parts”. Namita Wiggers, Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Craft writes the following description of his lecture for the American Craft Council’s online blog:

With characteristic humor, Clark surveyed the past 150 years, drawing socio-cultural parallels between the Arts & Crafts Movement of the British intelligentsia and the current state of the Studio Movement. Arguing that the desire for parity with the fine arts by artists, crafters (as Clark prefers), collectors, academia and institutions has created the demise of the movement itself, Clark expressed concerns that nostalgia and envy plague an aging community. As a result, he wryly quips, success is measured by escape from the “penitentiary” of craft into the “nirvana” of the art world. Instead of seeking a bridge to the fine arts, Clark advocates re-unification with design. It is here, he argues, that new business models and revitalized contemporary practices can be found, particularly in the recently growing and developing format of the applied arts in both Europe and the United States. In this new arena, Clark implies that the crafter can be more actively present in emerging scholarship and dialogue than through the perpetuation of older, hierarchical models.¹⁵

These two presentations differ in that Carmine Branagan’s 2004 presentation depicts the marginalization of craft as the result of external, unruly factors, while Garth Clark’s expresses this effect as resulting from internal attitudes. The common thread, however, among these and many other recent presentations and writings on craft is the rethinking of how to position this work as its own creative entity. The emerging consensus here assumes

that studio furniture would do better to realign itself as a form of craft-design rather than in its current conception, as a subcategory of fine art or as craft-art. Of course, this notion echoes a marketing strategy, but it also reflects observed patterns in both the profession and our culture of the kinds of work that individuals are now making and that the public appears to gravitate towards. The goal of this realignment, naturally, would be to move studio furniture out of the esoteric fringes and into the common consciousness—to widen its audience and reach—in the same way that the creations of popular designers continue shaping the conversation on contemporary furniture. That choice, however, ultimately lies, not with any organization or movement, but with each individual maker. In this studio profession, the work must come first.

As critical as the form of the finished work is to the social relevance of studio furniture, equally important are scholarship and writing. Much has been written about the craft experience, from makers like George Nakashima, Bernard Leach, and David Pye, but the most notable of these are from a personal, first-person point of view. Scholarship in the sense that Garth Clark proposes is only beginning to gain its footing. For example, at present only one university level textbook exists that chronicles the studio crafts in America, only recently developed under the leadership of the Center for Craft, Creativity and Design in North Carolina¹⁶—whereas innumerable texts for all periods and genres of fine art proliferate in abundance. In popular media, a prominently televised documentary series, *Craft in America: A Journey to the Artists, Origins and Techniques of American Craft*,¹⁷ profiles a broad spectrum of living makers in all media, signifying that a growing public interest in craft may prompt further scholarship of popular interest. As for studio furniture, only Edward S. Cooke, Gerald W. R. Ward, and Kelly H. L'Ecuyer's *The Maker's Hand: American Studio Furniture, 1940 – 1990* adequately captures the history and development of the field. For the interested, a functioning hodgepodge of formats for scholarship exist today: articles in craft-oriented magazine publications; critical essays in exhibition catalogs; thoughtful presentations at trade and craft conferences; and the occasional academic book publication (most recently, Glenn Adamson's *Thinking Through Craft* is a fine, new contribution). Within these various written and spoken formats is the living, breathing life-force of critical-thinking about craft. Though they contain disparate voices and are sometimes not in conversation with one another, this cumulative mass of ideas possesses the power to transform our public awareness and perception about studio crafts.

All together, this essay describes a portrait of studio furniture, its fundamental principles, and its challenges. For makers, identifying and understanding these principles and challenges provides them with a foundation upon which to build the relevant content of studio furniture, because it is one thing to build a body of work, but it is another entirely to do it well. To make is at some point, to struggle; yet despite the struggle, or perhaps because of it, studio furniture makers continue to challenge the creative boundaries of contemporary furniture with unique and powerful work. By the most simplistic interpretation, an exhibition of studio furniture simply exists as a method of showing new work with the intent to sell; but the greater work of an exhibition is to establish both the functional and cultural relevance of the work shown, to firmly embed that work into the structure of its originating society, and to frame a discussion about the importance of furniture within a cohesive conceptual narrative. Given the apparently marginal condition of studio furniture today, its exhibitions have no choice but to engage in this greater work.

Behind any creative process lies the question: What makes this work matter? This question can function as a motivating factor in the life of the studio furniture profession, infusing it with a kind of urgency. Something so fundamental (relevance) that casts such a powerful collective influence (motivation) is worth the exploration, and so this question (what makes this work matter?) is deeply important to my own thesis body of work. The graduate thesis exhibition accompanying this writing, *Narrative Drawers: Reconsidering Familiar Precedents of Drawer Furniture*, strives to engage in the greater work of my craft. My hope is that viewers will find this work meaningful to their own lives, recognizing themes and regarding familiar forms with renewed perspective. Drawn from the long legacy of American craft-based furniture making, this work reconsiders one familiar functional archetype across four unique works: The chest of drawers has served as a compartmental household container for centuries now, a history abundant with examples and ideas. Several points in this history serve as sources for the furniture pieces in this exhibition, specifically post-medieval American Mannerism, American Queen Anne, and Modernism. This thesis presents four challenges of our social expectations of chests of drawers, of how they must appear, and of how they must function. I want the questions raised through this work to originate from our psyches, to provoke our awareness with greater certainty than could occur with conventional furniture. I hope that people might realize without question that this furniture is clearly about our lifestyles and ourselves; that it can say something about who we are as a culture; that it is, in other words, relevant.

As this body of work developed I consciously choose to approach it as a framework for a personal narrative, intentionally ignoring the emerging consensus, which is moving toward craft-design and away from the long-standing craft-art model of furniture making. This media-specific, craft-based model better serves the conceptual nature of my work and the conversation I intend to provoke in its viewers and users. It is meant to exhibit in the context of art and craft galleries and, at last, to live in the homes of collectors. Because it is a graduate thesis, this effort is made as a platform upon which to develop my nascent professional artistic and conceptual vision, rather than as an exercise in the viability of financial gain. So regardless of the prevailing consensus on the state of studio furniture in the market place, this particular pursuit for relevance remains my own.

II. Evolution Themes within the Practice of Studio Furniture Making

The term "studio furniture" was first coined, defined, and later nurtured in following texts, by decorative arts historian Edward S. "Ned" Cooke in 1989 in an endnote to his essay for the catalog to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts exhibition titled *New American Furniture: The Second Generation of Studio Furnituremakers*.

Within this catalogue, I use the term studio furniture since I find it the clearest term. Other publications have used such terms as handmade furniture, art furniture, or even artiture, but each of these is misleading or highly subjective: handmade implies that the craftsperson eschews machinery in a romantic Ruskinian way; art furniture is a term with a very historical meaning referring to small-shop custom work in the last quarter of the nineteenth century; and artiture was originally used in a derogatory manner. Studio furniture is a more objective term since it conveys: an education based in the colleges rather than apprenticeship; the importance of a vigorous conceptual approach to design and construction; and the small scale of operation distinguished from factories or manufactories.¹⁸

I am inclined to capitalize the term, studio furniture, granting it the lofty position of a title, as "Studio Furniture". This inclination is, of course, a simple bias for a profession that inspires my own hopeful working career; even still, the term carries the weight of having defined and formalized a growing, though still disorganized profession. It is a specific enough definition developed by Cooke to encapsulate this disparate group of individuals under one identity, yet flexible enough to allow for a broad range of approaches to making. It includes woodworkers, metalworkers, glassmakers, and a variety of individuals utilizing all manner of materials, from found objects to cork to plastic. In the work shown today, studio furniture makers focus largely on one-of-a-kind concepts, yet a healthy proportion of them, one out of four, have made production work. Cooke's definition allows for all types of work from the studio shop, including individual pieces, editions and series, and even small scale production pieces. Still, despite this variety of methods and styles, this profession holds steadily onto its most familiar characteristics: wood remains the dominant material by a vast margin, galleries are largely the intended destination, and a high degree of craft

overwhelmingly leads the approaches to making.¹⁹ Although these defining factors could vary and the physical products of studio furniture may visibly change, the underlying conditions of Cooke's definition will likely remain fixed, possessing a resilience borne out by decades of extraordinary work. The lure of making has been strong enough to inspire what now amounts to several generations of makers who self-identify as studio furniture makers (myself included), drawn in by an admiration of both excellent workmanship and the mastery of materials. Craft, after all, remains a critical component of making, no matter the context, a fact that helps to thread studio furniture into the fabric of relevant object making in America. (If I may generalize here for a moment, a distinction may be made between the intentions of works of art and works of craft: If a principal goal of contemporary art is to confront how people think, then the goal of studio furniture is to affect how people live). In my own working process, I refer to the defining qualities of studio furniture and craft, believing that a well considered, carefully, and intimately produced piece of furniture can inspire a special kind of awe—the kind of awe that lures others to join in this profession—that a mass-market piece may not be capable of, no matter how unique its design. Woodworker and writer David Pye reflected upon this phenomenon in his 1968 treatise, *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*:

"The deterioration [of quality in our built environment] comes not because of bad workmanship in mass-production but because the range of qualities which mass-production is capable of just now is so dismally restricted; because each is so uniform and because nearly all lack depth, subtlety, overtones, variegation, diversity, or whatever you choose to call that which distinguishes the workmanship of a Stradivarius violin, or something much rougher like a modern ring-net boat."²⁰

Much has, of course, changed since Pye's writing, and the concepts of individuality and customizing have gained some traction in the mass-market with improved technologies; nonetheless, forty years on and the legacy of mass-production continues to yield blandness and soullessness on a larger scale than ever.

Crafts, unlike other types of functional objects, benefit from their singularity of creation, from the unrepeatable events of their making in which the maker indelibly leaves his "mark" within the final piece. More than just evidence of a maker's handwork, this "mark" is also the physical realization of a unique vision and a commitment to a unified approach of design and construction. In addition to the distinctive pleasure gained from living with these functional objects, patrons of craft enjoy the special condition that an

individual maker directly shaped his unique, personal expressions from raw materials. Objects made by clear and remarkable workmanship better invite the kind of emotional bonds that users might form with heirlooms—possessions they cherish and pass on to further generations. Crafts represent a celebration of the exceptional abilities and imagination of creative and capable individuals, a characterization that is difficult to apply to objects made outside the studio setting. I believe in the nature of craft for its ability to enhance the value of the way we live and the things we use, and particularly in the power of studio furniture to personify our living culture through the intelligent viewpoints of the people who make it.

As I develop my own vocabulary for making studio furniture, I tend toward themes that enable the exploration of my personal philosophies and ideals, as well as my own aesthetic expressions. These themes naturally draw from my own experiences, but they also stem from the long-standing precedent of over half a century of history of the studio furniture movement itself. In *The Maker's Hand: American Studio Furniture, 1940 – 1990* Edward S. Cooke, Gerald W. R. Ward, and Kelly H. L'Ecuyer describe the effect of layering personal expressions into the practice of furniture making and the conflict that resulted from these efforts:

"The 1950's emphasis may have been on making good furniture that became great art, but many in the 1960s wanted to make great art that happened to be furniture. Each side of this debate—art versus craft—had its staunch supporters. What some ... saw as freewheeling freedom of expression in these new forms, others saw as frivolous, self-indulgent, frequently bizarre creations. While some rejoiced in shedding the tedious restraints of fine materials and good craftsmanship, others lamented the loss of the ability to master a discipline. Some insisted on the maker's right to focus on personal preoccupations and tell stories with the work, to infuse it with comedy or tragedy through thematic elements; others deplored the neglect of—the lack of respect for—the consumer's needs and the rejection of utility as a commonsense, bottom-line criterion of all craft. The new spirits wished to look to the possibilities of the present and future, but others wished to retain a reverence for the achievements of the past. This polarity between tradition and innovation, between inherited culture and counterculture, was characteristic of the studio furniture movement in the 1960s."²¹

These conflicting themes persist in today's rendering of the studio furniture movement, and perfectly describe my own conceptions of studio furniture as well. Highlighting the persistence of these themes, I must add, is not to suggest that studio furniture has frozen in time or stagnates for lack of fresh input. Within this movement is an active conceptual,

visual, material dialogue; and yet, this field is still finding its legs. It continues growing, evolving, becoming—building upon a record of previous, relevant, cultural and functional themes. It is natural, then, that some themes persist: the inclination to tell stories through one's work, the challenges toward utility, or the reverence (or lack, thereof) toward a chosen material.

As works of studio furniture, the body of work composing this thesis, *Narrative Drawers: Reconsidering Familiar Precedents of Drawer Furniture*, is organized by several themes, some which reflect the conflicted history portrayed in Cooke's *The Maker's Hand*. In this body of work, in addition to the more typical themes of narrative and surface decoration so common in studio furniture, I apply themes that address historical references and the subversion of functional expectations. While these four principal themes weave into one another through the final exhibition, for the purpose of this writing they will be outlined separately. This exhibition consists of four unique works of drawer furniture, all constructed primarily from wood: *Tradition* (see Plates 1-4), an ironic variation on an eighteenth century Queen Anne style chest of drawers; *Perforated Chest of Drawers* (see Plates 5-7), a modern production style chest of drawers that is perforated with holes; *Private Exhibition* (see Plates 8-11), an open frame structure containing clothes pins for hanging t-shirts, underwear, and socks, in which three unenclosed hanging racks on drawer sliders essentially put all the held contents on display; and *Private Life* (see Plates 12-15), a conceptual variation on an early-American Hadley style chest-over-drawer. Each of these four furniture pieces is visually distinct from each other, and so, instead of appearances binding them into a cohesive body of work, it is the four organizing themes that attempt to unite them.

The dominant theme inhabiting these four furniture pieces is narrative. These visually embedded stories infuse the four pieces and give them their meaning—they may be symbolic, literal, ironic, or even comic. Though each furniture piece embodies its own narrative, when viewed together these pieces form a richer, enhanced narrative, as though amplified by their proximity to one another. Each piece and each story provides a further chapter toward the common tale of the exhibition, one that concentrates upon the archetype of drawer furniture as its central character. This amplified narrative, apparent when these works are viewed together, characterizes how various forms of drawer furniture may be reconsidered.

In American history, the drawer case has followed an evolutionary path from the seventeenth century chest-over-drawer toward the contemporary chest of drawers in use

today. These pieces from our nation's past were once an embodiment of a social meaning that referred directly to its function. For example, the chest-over-drawer pieces (what we think of as blanket chests today) once served the social function of dowry vessel and household coffer, commissioned for the collection and containment of domestic items, usually in preparation for marriage.²² Later, in the eighteenth century, chests of drawers like the highboy served the social function of establishing and confirming a family's prosperity and education, and were displayed prominently in homes—the finer the materials and craft, the more purposeful the display of refinement.²³ These particular social meanings of household possessions are arcane in today's culture, transformed with our modern circumstances into less structured social values. Today in our society, a person's furniture typically does not carry the same weight over his worth as it once did. Rather than performing as a stand-in to his social position, it might reflect the range of a person's personal experiences—less a surrogate for, and more an indicator of one's identity. Whatever social meaning a given furniture piece possesses in our culture today, it may simply be to convey the personality and taste of the owner—the modern variation of refinement. Unsurprisingly, this social context is the natural habitat of studio furniture: an environment in which an individual maker may freely employ furniture in the elaboration of personal themes, as any artist might. Naturally, narratives abound, and this thesis is no exception.

Many examples where narrative guides the making process occur across the studio furniture profession. A strong instance comes from Kim Kelzer, who shapes and paints figurative furniture forms to create her humorous personal and social narratives. Virginia T. Boyd describes Kelzer's particular narrative approach to furniture making in *Contemporary Studio Case Furniture: The Inside Story*:

“Of particular note is the use of humor and wit for communicating ideas through furniture forms. ...A sense of the absurd and playful in decorative art objects is not new and is alive and well today in many art forms. It permits a serious idea to be explored in a nonthreatening way, as a cartoon deals with sensitive issues through a light deft touch, as does Kim Kelzer in *Home on the Range*. She employs two stereotypic cultural icons to comment about social roles in American culture, the staunchly independent cowboy roaming freely over the open frontier and the housebound housewife whose circumscribed dependent life is tethered to the kitchen.”²⁴

Kelzer uses her furniture directly to tell a story. Her figurative and cartoonish forms stand like characters in a comedy, acutely portraying her personal observations in clever, fantastic scenarios that manage to also celebrate the function of each piece. Wendy Maruyama is another maker who employs furniture in the exploration of personal history. She says of one piece,

“Ever since I was a kid, I have always been fascinated by animals. I have always been obsessed and saddened by the extinction of animal species, especially those decimated by man. The loss of the Tasmanian Tiger is at the very top of this list. The simple piece, *You don't know what you've got til it's gone*, is an homage to this animal, much like a 'Butsudan,' a family shrine that is used in the Buddhist faith.”²⁵

As in much of her furniture, Maruyama's narratives draw deeply from her memory. Through her work we might learn of ignored histories, witness her emotional attachment to personal subjects, or even fathom the depth of potential in creating narrative furniture.

The narratives portrayed in these examples, like in much of studio furniture, underscore the changing landscape of our American value systems, a domain in which furniture serves a historically less distinguished role. Generally speaking, while our furniture may no longer occupy an integral position in the social hierarchy of households, it does continue to play an important part in establishing our personal identities. It sets our conceptions of ourselves in physical form, signifying to others who we are and how we choose to live and measuring our personal histories with continued use. It may echo our social conditions or simply be an end in itself. Our furniture may narrate the stories of our lives or add new ones to reflect our changing situations. Like an accessory worn upon the body, our furniture tells others something about our tastes, our interests, our habits, or our desires.

Narrative Drawers: Reconsidering Familiar Precedents of Drawer Furniture contains its own story. The exhibition unfolds this way: This furniture is familiar—all are drawer pieces, and all consist, in part, of recognizable forms and styles. This work, in its varied forms, is the kind of furniture we Americans have grown up with or seen in the homes of families and friends—styles from across our history, into which an anthology of past cultural zeitgeist and meaning is documented—but the pieces shown in this exhibition have altered those references. In one piece, its story is a display of irreverence toward the style that serves as its source; in another, it is a challenge to the conventional function of its own furniture type; in another piece, the narrative is a flaunting display of my private

undergarments; and in another, it recontextualizes a traditional furniture form with a provocative depiction of sexual coupling. Our expectations of how these types of furniture must look and function are challenged and subverted, and so they must be reevaluated according to different rules—rules that each viewer must decode according to his own personal history with drawer furniture. In short, this body of work is a provocation to our continuing historical narrative about furniture—it is, in fact, furniture about furniture, self-referential and narrative. It is intended to provoke, to enlighten, to engage, and perhaps even to annoy. It begins in the traditions established by the First Generation of studio furniture makers (a reverence for craft and wood) and follows through with lessons pioneered by the Second Generation of makers (developing personal narratives and "the rejection of utility as a commonsense, bottom-line criterion of all craft").²⁶ It is functional, though not conventional, and seeks to incite a dialogue about the nature of drawer furniture, where socially imposed limits and confrontational behaviors push against each other. A common narrative arises through these furniture pieces—an irreverent, unconventional, provocative display of altered historical references—and with it surface questions: Why do these furniture styles undergo such manipulations? Why is one upside-down? Why is one perforated? Why can't I close the drawer or lid in this one? Why do these pieces so openly display their private spaces and private behaviors, when we expect discretion? And, finally, what is the significance of drawer furniture in our culture today?

A second strong theme saturating this thesis work presents a remaking of recognizable American furniture styles. Our understanding of these historical styles draws deep from our national psyche—styles that, in a sense, embody a kind of memory of the events that shaped their particular morphologies. Because they are so familiar to us, it is easy to look at these common forms and think that we know all there is to know about them. They are, after all, not visually new, nor do they give us very new information about what it is to be an American in the twenty-first century; yet the memories remain, reminding us where we have been. To simply think we understand these styles of furniture or, worse, to dismiss them as common is actually to stop thinking about them. Under these conditions, our preconceptions lead our imagination, and these forms and styles can no longer join the conversation about furniture; we have moved on, and they are taken for granted. But a dismissive culture is an apathetic culture. Here, in this cultural territory, is where *Narrative Drawers* sticks its flag.

Using humor and provocation, this thesis remarks on these culturally bound preconceptions we hold toward historical furniture forms—preconceptions about what

functional furniture ought to look like and how it should perform its given function. These presumptions are, after all, drawn from precedents, and precedents are hard-won and not easily remade. The styles represented in this thesis, therefore, act as a foil to this culture of presumption; but this work is not simply mocking in its approach. I am personally reverent of the original examples and often inspired by their achievement; I make use of them to allow others to look with renewed interest at these forms and concepts from across our history, perhaps seeing them from a different point of view, in abstracted contexts and atypical compositions. My own relationship to furniture styles from past eras originated in my own home and in the homes of my relatives. For example, my grandparents owned pieces derived from various historical styles, some of which are imprinted on my memory: Twentieth century upholstered production chairs and sofas derived from Louis XVI and Late Victorian styles, contrasted with modern, so-called “artisan” burl wood tables in their living room. There were side tables, desks, dressers, and chairs that represented a range of 19th and 20th century American styles. My own family owned a production-made oak dining table based on European Arts and Crafts construction forms and production chairs derived from the Windsor style. Growing up I possessed very little understanding of the histories these pieces represented or how they came to be so ubiquitous in the homes of so many Americans. As I evolved as a designer and a maker, I often strained against these forms and styles in an effort to negate them from my visual vocabulary, but only at the cost of my own creative education and growth. The stylistic pull of my own generation is toward individualized approaches to design, toward inventing novel forms and staking new claims, toward rising above the past and forging only forward, and I have duly followed that path toward my own sense of self-satisfaction. But now this thesis body of work represents a crossroads in my understanding of the furniture that has shaped me with the furniture I want to make. In this work I embrace the past and strive to incorporate its lessons into my design vocabulary, drawing from my memory as the genesis of this investigation.

The use of historical reference sources lends an immediate familiarity to the furniture forms in this thesis, which then creates a readymade context for the kinds of conceptual responses explored in my work. Other makers have pursued similar paths in their own work, referring to stylistic precedents and mimicking past forms to render their own narratives in studio furniture. A thread may be drawn from the original source pieces, through examples of studio furniture like Tommy Simpson's pie chests²⁷ and Gordon Peteran's scrap-made demilune tables,²⁸ to the furniture of *Narrative Drawers*. In these contemporary efforts, it is an audience's familiarity with common historical styles and

forms that enables the success of these works. This familiarity lends each new piece its necessary accessibility, permitting viewers to quickly relate to the subject at hand and project their own experiences into the work. As I developed this thesis furniture, I researched historical sources that could be mined for emotional relevance, and contextualized those outdated forms and styles to the culture of my own lifetime. A viewer would likely recognize the eighteenth century furniture forms of *Tradition*: the sensuous cabriole legs, the curvaceous cutouts in the apron, and the elegant solid wood construction. A similar sense of familiarity may occur when viewing the sheet panel construction of *Perforated Chest of Drawers*, so typical of spare modernist case-goods. The chest-over-drawer form of *Private Life* easily recalls the early-American Hadley style chests, with its etched and painted façade referencing the original seventeenth century tulip-and-leaf themes. Central to *Private Exhibition* are its rows of old-fashioned clothesline pins, so ripe with nostalgia, emblematic of a household's relationship to the land, and so ubiquitous in an era before electric convenience. The original conditions that led to these impulses in furniture making no longer exist, but the pieces themselves do, like living remnants of the events that shaped them. Where these shapes were once functionally and stylistically suited to their times, their specific relevance to our time is less certain. Our modern lifestyle requires a different furniture than was needed in the era before televisions, computers, or kitchen appliances. As history drives forward, certain types of furniture fall into obsolescence, no longer fulfilling a direct need in the daily lives of people. In modern homes a pie chest is reduced to a nostalgic artifact; a demilune table, once demonstrating a household's refinement, now more likely represents its owner's taste in antiques; or a cabriole leg, once a culmination of centuries of craftsmanship and refinement, has become a commonplace rendition of "high-style" furniture, voided of its social significance in the absence of a relevant historical context. These outmoded furniture types await their creative rediscovery; thus, historical referencing is ripe territory for any furniture maker wishing to make narrative work. With the passing of its original context—few, if any, people actually use a pie chest any longer—the contemporary maker may recontextualize the historical form with a new purpose, even if that purpose is to simply tell a private story. It is a post-modern notion, suitable to our contemporary culture.²⁹

The third theme of this thesis builds upon the aforementioned notion that societal presumptions about the appearance of furniture can impact its physical outcome. Sometimes how a piece of furniture looks is determined less by how it functions than by cultural forces outside the piece. This effect is true for the work made today as much as it

was of work in the past. We presume that a table must look, more or less, one way, a chair another, and a chest of drawers yet another way. Perhaps this phenomenon occurs simply because the morphology of furniture derives so strongly from the forms of our own bodies, from its scale and its proportions, so that certain shapes are an obvious conclusion; but more than that, perhaps we simply get used to seeing furniture in particular forms. Familiar and expected shapes can become fixed into the popular consciousness and burned into our collective retina—the familiar curves of a leg into a clawed foot, the comfortably rounded bead of a table edge, or the exact roundness of a Shaker drawer pull. In this sense, fad and fashion actually matter. We may think of this kind of social perception as a distortion in our collective understanding of functional furniture forms. Distortions of perception can occur here when we mistakenly view certain precedents of form as finished or finite; but, preference is not finite, and so our expectations of functional form should not be either. So when these socially fixed furniture morphologies are challenged, when their forms and appearances are manipulated or even ignored, or when the typical visual cues are dismantled, as is sometimes the case in studio furniture, then we cannot rely on notions of appearance or typical function. As viewers we must then search the work as it is presented for clues, rather than as how we might expect it to be. This thesis, in the continuing spirit of studio furniture, mines this territory for further revelations about these distortions, presenting various subversions to the expectations of how drawer furniture ought to look or perform.

When we view a typical piece of furniture, we understand its presence after first recognizing its archetype and then comparing its appearance against previous precedents. As I discussed earlier, archetypes in furniture are givens. They are the model examples of objects that support human activities and are, therefore, the basis for all functional forms. But a precedent is merely a guide, rather than a fundamental source. Precedents develop when public opinion perceives similar ventures favorably and repeats them, a situation where both furniture makers and viewers collectively select which formal attributes are most relevant and acceptable. It is not difficult to imagine how distortions in this shared perception can evolve. After all, while archetypes are constant, precedents can be remade. They suffer shifting social mores and fickle tastes, and they are subject to opinion and interpretation. With a seemingly infinite variety of possible shapes, sizes, colors, and materials that can contribute to the form of an object, the thrust of our cultural development tends to favor a relatively few, broad styles of any given archetype, all depending on the culture, politics, technology, and economy of the time of its creation—and

these styles tend to self-perpetuate, though not necessarily because they are the best or most reasoned solutions in the development of an archetype, but because they are, for a time, the most popular. Precedents of a type naturally spread their influence and propagate across the culture. In the example of drawer furniture, our distortions become evident in the bland, unthreatening chests of drawers manufactured and sold by commercial retailers, designed for the broadest appeal at the least cost. For a studio furniture maker, two aspects, or sites, in drawer furniture provide fruitful ground for challenging expectations and unmaking precedents: within the case that houses the drawers and within the symbolic space of the drawer itself.

Studio furniture makers are reinvestigating drawer furniture in many ways today. John Eric Byers has, throughout his career, built an inventive assortment of drawer furniture variations. He has stretched and exaggerated the more traditional forms of drawer chests, as with *Curved High Boy* from 1990, and reimagined them as stacks of individual drawer cases, like staggered towers of old-fashioned hat boxes, as in *Nine Ovals* from 2001.³⁰ In practice, these pieces function no differently than their formally conventional counterparts, and yet Byers' gestures cause a viewer to reflect upon her own mental impression of a chest of drawers, directly engaging with her culturally held notions of what drawer cases ought to look like. Maker Bob Trotman makes unique drawer pieces as well, albeit with loftier conceptual intentions. He goes as far as housing drawers within anthropomorphic sculptures, challenging the expectation that a drawer case exists in service of the drawer. His drawers assume a symbolic posture, penetrating into or through human figures, like in *White Guy* from 1994.³¹ A drawer case could not be any less furniture-like than with these works. Another maker, Tom Loeser, develops drawer pieces that unsettle our expectations of how drawer furniture must behave. His piece, *More Multiple Complications* from 1999, transforms a chest of drawers into a mental exercise, in which drawers are contained within drawers and can only be opened through a sequence of deliberate actions.³² With this piece a user must actively consider how a chest of drawers performs its task, an effect that lays bare the symbolic nature of Loeser's expression. The sequenced configuration of drawers within drawers alters not only the activity of opening the drawers, but also the space within. Drawers contain—that is their simple function—but Loeser's drawers embody. They characterize the act of containment as much as they also contain, with the simple functional device of drawers containing drawers.

The four pieces in this thesis, in a similar fashion to some of the studio furniture of today, subvert the familiar intentions of typical drawer furniture. They confront the

common cues that users might generally rely upon in understanding a piece—drawer interiors are not fully enclosed or can not be concealed, simple functional conduct is disrupted, or in the case of *Tradition*, the expected form is inverted and the legs do not rest on the ground. These contradictions of precedent are designed as conceptual mirrors to the kinds of presumptive distortions that inevitably develop in the evolution of drawer cases and drawer interiors—what we collectively view as normal is essentially a narrowed and, therefore, distorted view of what is possible. Drawers are containers. They are boxes that close into a surrounding case. They enclose and they conceal. As furniture users, we expect this performance from drawers, but the pieces in this thesis undermine these expectations of normal, intending instead to broaden our collective perception about how furniture should look and perform. Thus, some of these pieces confront our cultural taboos and social prohibitions about what we privately contain. The space within a drawer is typically meant to hold, and sometimes to hide—it is symbolically private—but these drawers display rather than conceal. They subvert, even invert, the forms of socially dictated probity in our household drawer furniture. In my own chest of drawers in the bedroom of my home, I keep my underwear in the top drawer, which is a common usage; and so with *Perforated Chest of Drawers* the case surrounding the top drawer is riddled with holes that transform this traditionally private space into a kind of peep show. With *Private Exhibition* the “drawers” consist of clothespins on hanging racks and drawer slides, rather than enclosed boxes, and are intended for hanging socks, underwear, and undershirts in an open display of these typically private items. With *Private Life*, a chest over drawer piece, the drawer is mechanically linked to the lid of the chest, so that it opens when the lid is closed and closes when the lid is opened. The chest itself has no bottom panel covering the drawer cavity, and so the drawer can never be concealed.

The subject of privacy is in flux in our nation today, surfacing in political and legal arenas (surveillance systems) as well as in the technology structures in both our homes and workplaces (reality television, online video, and social networking). We share more than we once did, using developing Internet technologies, and, naturally, some people are pushing back against this sudden rush of voyeurism and exhibitionism. This time of heightened civil anxiety and greater social provocation is the terrain of a culture war over the morality of America—a ripe context for creating culturally relevant studio work. *Narrative Drawers* adds to this conversation with focused challenges and provocations, with narrative scenarios that disrupt our conventions and taboos, and in manipulations of drawer cases and drawer spaces that undercut common precedents.

The fourth and final major theme defining this body of work is the use of flat graphic surface decoration. The application of surface decoration has enjoyed a wide-ranging history across every craft and art form, including studio furniture. Relief carving, marquetry, parquetry, and painting have long been major components of woodworking and furniture making. The use of graphic decorative painting has, of course, been applied through various points in furniture's history—as with the American Hadley chests of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, or in faux techniques, such as Japanning, that occurred in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in America³³—but it was not validated in a modern context until the Second Generation of studio furniture makers established themselves. It was really an innovation of the Second Generation, in the context of contemporary craft, to combine carving and shaping with decorative painting in the pursuit of self-expression.

The desire to “make great art that happened to be furniture,”³⁴ to use furniture making as a means for self-expression, enabled the reintroduction of pattern decoration and painting into the practice. Makers like Jenna Goldberg³⁵ and John Eric Byers³⁶ create furniture with carved and painted pattern reliefs. Other makers, such as Craig Nutt³⁷ and Kim Kelzer,³⁸ carve and shape figurative sculptural forms, then apply paint to distinguish and delineate object shapes. Creative efforts like these have helped establish surface decoration as a recognized component of studio furniture making.

Narrative Drawers follows in these established traditions with its own decorative images and motifs, applying them with paint, ink, and fabric, or generating them by altering surfaces. Each of these four furniture pieces contains a decorative graphic: In *Tradition* the graphic is a pattern of self-referential, line-drawn representations which line the bottom of each drawer, showing this furniture piece in both its finished, “upside-down” position and how it might appear in a more familiar upright position; in *Private Exhibition* etched drawings depict nude male bodies, images of both modern and early American case furniture, and typically masculine underclothes, all which cover the inside frame surfaces of the three clothespin racks; in *Private Life*, the façade is etched and painted with line renderings of Kama Sutra positions; and in *Perforated Chest of Drawers* the graphic pattern is a cluster of variously-sized sawn holes that penetrate through the case into the top drawer space.

These four pieces of furniture come together into one exhibition with four major themes connecting them: narrative, remarks on historical precedents, a confrontation of expectations, and a presentation of graphic, decorative motifs. The exhibition focuses on

drawer furniture because of its rich symbolic potential: it contains, it encloses space, and it develops from a long, fertile history that produced many forms and styles. My intention is to capture something of today's zeitgeist through the themes of this exhibition—the prevailing sense of provocation, irreverence, and contradiction in these works develops out of present social attitudes in America, especially from those of my own Generation X. I intend this work to reflect upon our culture and hope it might begin a discussion about the nature and significance of drawer furniture in our society today. Auspiciously, the role of the studio furniture movement in America's cultural conversation has had time to evolve and mature—the makers of foregoing generations have presented furniture as a medium for raising and asking questions beyond simple functional issues—and, so, the subject and themes of this thesis have an established history to build upon. Ultimately, the success of *Narrative Drawers* depends upon established precedents in developing its particular point of view, for both context and source material. Though each of these four furniture pieces stand alone quite well, the combined body of work stands much stronger than each one alone.

III. Exhibition

Narrative Drawers: Reconsidering Familiar Precedents of Drawer Furniture

Tradition

(Cherry, brass, paper, linen, ink; 22" x 17 3/16" x 39 3/4" high; 2006)

Tradition (see Plates 1-4) is the first furniture piece conceived for *Narrative Drawers*. The impulse to create this piece was immediate and clear: I would carefully emulate the style and themes of an emblematic American furniture style, the eighteenth century Queen Anne, for a chest of drawers more suited to contemporary life, like a side table, that would appear upside-down yet function properly in this position. Through my research of the Queen Anne style, I came to prefer the more idiosyncratic pastoral pieces, specifically from the Newport, Rhode Island region, rather than the more urban, high style pieces. These unc cosmopolitan variations seem to capture more of the everyday, unpretentious American in both material and form, with atypical scrollwork, unrefined proportions, and locally found woods such as maple, pine, walnut, or cherry.³⁹ These attributes appeal to my own interest in creating visually approachable furniture, because they avoid treating their designs and materials with too much preciousness. Instead of conforming to a low-boy or knee-hole desk, as would have been common to the period but is outdated today, I chose to update the design of this chest of drawers to a modern side table, because I would like this work to speak about our lives today; not only to tell a personal story, but also to present a challenge to our expectations of how our furniture must appear. My purpose in creating this work is not simply to replicate, but to remark. And so the design of this piece is a distillation of several regional variations from the Newport region, incorporating appropriate details: a high apron with exposed dovetails and fluid, semicircular scrollwork; cabriole legs with circular pad feet; graduated dimensioning of the drawers, which was common to the period chest-on-frame pieces; and classical trim and edge profiles of simple beads and coves. In keeping with classical traditions, a hierarchical ordering controls the apron scroll, trim, and moulding designs, as well as the overall composition.

Tradition is an inverted chest of drawers containing three drawers—the cabriole legs rise upwards, while the drawers rest on the ground below. The effect of this inversion makes the whole elaborately conceived leg and frame structure appear awkward and, even, unnecessary. It recalls an insect trapped on its back, legs futilely searching the air. Care was taken to ensure that the piece could never be diverted from these intentions and set on its legs: the drawers are indexed into the solid Cherry case to fit only in this "upside-down" position. To maintain this effect, the pairs of brass pulls on each drawer are installed upright relative to the viewer, so that he may understand that the drawers are meant to function as shown. Both the drawer case and drawers are constructed from solid wood with traditional joinery, such as hand-cut dovetails in the drawer boxes and sliding dovetails connecting the drawer dividers to the case sides. In a typical eighteenth century chest-on-frame piece, the underside of the apron frame, where the scrollwork would have been scraped and shaped, would be left rough; in *Tradition*, however, these surfaces are at the top side of the piece, and so are sanded smooth to the touch. In its proportions, the widths of the visible components—legs, case, and apron frame—appear slightly thick. This visual weight is consistently applied and serves to reinforce the more pastoral nature of the piece, but it also seems to ground the piece more deeply into its inverted position. *Tradition* is finished in many smooth coats of Danish oil.

The drawers themselves are built from solid cherry wood, consistent with the rest of the piece. Upon opening the drawers, a user discovers a repeating drawer-liner pattern, composed of an alternating pair of sketches of this very furniture piece: one depicts the inverted piece as we experience it, while the other shows how this piece might have appeared if it were sitting on its legs. This second drawing rests idealized within an outlined frame that evokes a period mirror frame (see Plates 3 & 4). Each of the three drawer liners is created in a different media from the others, composing a kind of material progression through the history of drawer furniture in America. The largest, upper drawer has the pattern printed in black on white paper, the middle with black thread embroidered onto natural linen, and the slimmest, lower drawer with white ink stamped directly onto the wood.

The experience of bending down to the floor to use a drawer while the cabriole legs rise up into the air can feel absurd, but, in a sense, that is the point. *Tradition* is playful and humorous, and it prods us to think about the shape of the objects we use. But it is more than a simple a joke; it is also a narrative about our American identity. It is an emblem of our past and of the quality of workmanship that once built this nation. While the presence

of *Tradition* is immediate, without further investigation into its interiors, its deeper meaning might lay undiscovered—the narrative continues inside. It is a fully functional piece of furniture, but that ability, while important, is only part of its intent. It is designed to reflect our modern attitudes about the marginal role of fine furniture craft in modern culture, and to challenge an expected precedent. It is, after all, furniture about furniture, a work of craft that invites viewers to reconsider these works we take for granted.

Perforated Chest of Drawers

(Walnut, plywood, aluminum, locksets; 27 1/2" x 17 3/8" x 38 7/8" high; 2006)

Where *Tradition* introduces the use of historical reference and narrative into this thesis, *Perforated Chest of Drawers* (see Plates 5-7) adds a discussion about the nature of privacy. As I considered the ways in which I might further respond to the traits that define containment furniture, I quickly realized that, in addition to storage, concealment is also an integral component of drawer furniture. Some things we like to put away, while others we prefer to hide. In our culture, people place a value upon their privacy, but also upon the need for propriety; and so the ability to hide away potentially embarrassing objects is an essential function, one that drawer furniture readily fulfills. For many people, their underwear is regarded as a private article of clothing and sometimes, even, as an embarrassing one. When apart from our bodies, our underwear makes direct reference to the sizes and shapes of our bodies, to those places we prefer to cover, and perhaps even to the fact of our sexuality. We typically allow only those with whom we are intimate to view these pieces of clothing, and when not in use, we use our drawer chests to hold them out of sight. The successful function of a chest of drawers, when used for concealment, relies on the premise of secrecy for the user. My suspicion is that for many people it is the top drawer of these chests that store underwear, so, unsurprisingly, it is this drawer that is the focus of *Perforated Chest of Drawers*.

Perforated Chest is a four-drawer plywood chest on a solid wood base. Its design is simple, with flat, rectangular planes and square, unadorned edges, a form that derives handily from a modern, industrialized aesthetic like the mid-century Modern style. As with

Tradition, I adhered to the relevant historical precedents and material choices, constructing this piece with techniques appropriate to Modern production furniture, but also maintaining a high level of workmanship. The base frame is made with solid Walnut, and the chest and drawers are constructed from plywood with a veneer of Walnut and joined with biscuits. The drawer fronts are attached to their sides with sliding-dovetails, and the drawers run on simple side-hung wood runners. The drawer fronts fit into the case, rather than overlaying, much like the chest fits into its base. Circular aluminum drawer pulls and keyhole plates add bright highlights and an augmented sense of function to the front of the piece. It is finished in coats of spray lacquer. These features all complete a list of effective qualities that reflect the kinship of this work with mid-century Modern furniture. The planar, modular drawer furniture designs of George Nelson and of Charles and Ray Eames come readily to mind, as do those of maker George Nakashima.

Perforated Chest of Drawers is not a replica, however. It is an original work, though it does draw its inspiration from the Modern period, when practical, simply constructible forms became typical in American households. Again, like with *Tradition*, this nod to a historical period is useful in establishing an immediate reference for viewers: Modernism signifies functionality and efficacy. A viewer may search his memory for the familiar precedents seen in *Perforated Chest*, at which point he may choose to ponder why its top drawer is full of holes and stripped of its veneer down to the plywood core—across each surface surrounding the top drawer are holes, from one inch to three inches in diameter, that penetrate through to the interior. It is immediately clear that a critical element of this piece, its privacy, is subverted. Suddenly, all Modern efficacy is stripped away, like the veneer around the drawer. As though to reinforce this sense of loss, each of the three walnut-veneered lower drawers has a functional lockset and a circular aluminum keyhole plate—not only are the lower drawers enclosed, but they may also be locked. This juxtaposition adds to the humor of the piece and highlights its contradiction: privacy instead of exposure. It leaves a user defenseless to voyeurism. So, while *Perforated Chest* functions, in a manner of speaking, as a chest of drawers, it also serves as a conversation piece, nudging at social conventions and at private intentions.

Private Exhibition

(Maple, commercial drawer slides, steel, acrylic paint; 23 3/4" x 15" x 76" high; 2006)

As I continued to develop upon the suggestions of *Tradition* and *Perforated Chest of Drawers*, the contrast between privacy and display began to dominate my thinking. Where *Perforated Chest* subverted the functional enclosure of the chest of drawers, this next piece would express a more complete exposure of its contents. It would depict a more extreme version of display, openly exhibiting men's undergarments in an anthropomorphic format. Furthermore, it would attempt to portray my own body by proxy, naked and exposed in a piece of furniture. Certain developments in present American society inspired this direction in my thesis. Foremost is the observation that our collective levels of acceptance for privacy invasions are dramatically changed from pre-9/11 standards. We now live in a time when many more citizens of our country are willing to accept less personal privacy if it means that we are a safer society. At the same time, youth- and popular-culture push the levels of exhibitionism to ever farther extremes. Exhibitionism has become mundane, and invading privacy is now a cultural preoccupation. Within *Private Exhibition* (see Plates 8-11) lies the following question: If putting underwear on display is not considered risky, then what is?

If a major reason for our use of drawer furniture is to conceal objects, then what would it be like to effectively eliminate the enclosure from a chest of drawers? The result would be a piece of furniture devoted to the intentional display of its contents rather than to their concealment. While my objective was to reduce the physical presence of the chest, I also wished this piece to express a physical aspect of the drawers. To achieve this expression, *Private Exhibition* celebrates a modern manifestation of drawer function, featuring commercially produced mechanical drawer slides as stand-ins for the typical drawer box and case. These functioning slides suspend from steel rods into the frame interior, held away from the maple wood in a display of utilitarian symbolism. In the service of creating an expression of exposure, the case is condensed into an open, wall-supported frame, the drawers are modified into exposed practical components, and the contents are displayed openly. Without the drawer box as an enclosure, the contents of this furniture piece become a principle part of its form. Here we see a display of men's undergarments—undershirts, boxer underpants, and socks—all white and individually hanging from the steel rods in three drawer sections (seven rods for each section, totaling twenty-one rods across the piece). Laid out with shirts above, boxers in the middle, and

socks below, the overall appearance is highly anthropomorphic. Even its scale and proportions match my own, with a frame height of six feet, four inches, a width of twenty-three and three-quarter inches, and a proportionate space at top indicating where my head sits. From this vertical maple frame, three shorter maple frames extend, anchoring the piece into the wall and marking out three drawer- and four body-sections (head, chest, waist, and legs). Lining the interiors of these three shorter frames are etched and painted scenes, all black or red acrylic paint on a white acrylic gesso field (see Plate 10). These decorative etchings attempt to establish a further link between body and furniture, depicting masculine bodies, undergarments on and off the body, and various styles and components of drawer furniture. For example, some of these caricatures portray early American highboys, a style of furniture composed, in part, of anthropomorphic forms and proportions, such as the length and curve of a cabriole leg, or the overall torso-waist-leg proportioning that looks very much like a body on legs. These painted images remind us that our clothes are here to cover our modesty and, at the same time, that our furniture is meant to contain and conceal our clothes. Our clothes and our furniture both relate to our own bodies by design, in scale, proportion, form, and image, through their mutual purpose of covering what they conceal. *Private Exhibition* removes this projected outer enclosure and, instead, presents a display of personal, interior elements. The piece is finished in the clear, water-based finish, Minwax Polycrylic.

A final, though very important, element of this composition has a long history of use in the American landscape: the clothes peg (see Plate 11). This object, out of necessity, contributed to a great irony of American modesty, as clotheslines stretched across neighborhoods, alleyways, and countrysides. Until the development of electric dryers for the household, generations of people had been unintentionally displaying their underclothing for all to see. Clotheslines were once a common presence in the landscape, but now are little used and are even shunned by image-conscious homeowner's associations.⁴⁰ The clothespin and its predecessor, the clothes peg, now are more symbol than practical device, supplanted by technology and the growing desire for convenience. Nonetheless, the symbolism is still strong. It remains a quaint object of craft, full of nostalgia and obsolescence, and representing a long history of manual labor, social inequity, and gender roles for those who maintained America's households. For *Private Exhibition*, the clothes peg recalls this spotted past and helps to ground this otherwise very contemporary and personal furniture work within a historical conversation. It portrays the

past and present intertwined, but it also helps to provide a framework for remarking on the condition of exhibitionism in our contemporary culture.

Private Exhibition is, fundamentally, a revisionist clothesline, made compact for a home interior in a chest of drawers format. Quarter-inch diameter steel rods act as clotheslines for twenty-one pairs of custom-made maple clothes pegs. Each clothes peg has a cube-shaped head on a cylindrical body, and, like the frame interior surfaces, each is decorated with painted etchings depicting body and furniture scenes. All together, these decorative etchings narrate a layered tale of the somatic relationship between our bodies, our clothing, and our containment furniture. The overall effect of this piece is very like a presentation, where the vertical wood frame circumscribes a full-scale window to my underclothes. Without the enclosure, the convention of drawer containment assumes a transformed purpose: its contents become objects of display and a part of the visual expression of the furniture. In this way, *Private Exhibition* attempts to embrace our burgeoning culture of self-exposure and privacy invasion.

Private Life

(Red oak, steel, Milkpaint; 21 1/2" x 17 3/8" x 14" high; 2006)

The final piece created for *Narrative Drawers* is titled *Private Life* (see Plates 12-15). I developed this piece in a state of greater clarity about the intentions of this thesis. It successfully communicates the themes, as outlined in Section II of this writing, in one coherent furniture form: it captures a specific narrative, strongly refers to an exact historical furniture style and type, confounds our functional expectations of that type, and applies cogent surface decoration. *Private Life* derives from early American Hadley-period chests, specifically from those created in the Hampshire County area of western Massachusetts, between about 1680 and 1740. This area included the town of Hadley, which later gave rise to the name "Hadley chest." These three-century-old American furniture pieces are rich in decorative content and symbolism, but also in purpose. It is commonly supposed that these chests were commissioned by fathers, at a high cost, as dowry vessels for daughters for the collection and containment of domestic items in

preparation for marriage.⁴¹ Naturally, the chest-over-drawer format of these pieces is specific to their intended functions as household coffers. The curious tulip-and-leaf relief carving across the façade surfaces of many of these chests was also particular to the region. This florid carving design helped to unify the seams across the panels and frames, but also personalized each furniture piece, providing historians today with a broad regional narrative to contemplate.

This rich history provides fertile source material for this thesis. For *Private Life* I further developed the narrative about the social acceptance of less privacy and greater exhibitionism. The function of the original Hadley chests as hope chests, literally containing the hopes and dreams of women ready for marriage, provides a unique context for exploring the contemporary narrative of this thesis furniture piece. The societal expectations of early American culture no longer exist here—gender hierarchy continues to flatten toward complete equality between men and women—though the broader framework of social expectations remains in place. We expect both men and women to strive toward both civic and personal responsibility, and, naturally, we still have limits to what is considered socially acceptable behavior. Those limits, however, are very different from those of early America, and even still, they continue to shift their position, loosening in some contexts and tightening in others. For instance, our current definition of propriety allows that minimal clothing is acceptable at the beach, but not in the workplace—we allow context to influence our propriety today, rather than relying upon absolute principles, as the Puritans of early America did—and, as I described in earlier sections of this writing, we are able and are willing to share more of our private lives with others through electronic media. In many contexts, the limits of socially acceptable behavior, like a taboo, are increasingly harder to define. And so the reference to Hadley chests encourages this comparison between the culture that created these early American chests and our culture today.

Private Life is a coffer for a very different set of hopes and dreams from a traditional Hadley chest. The emphasis upon becoming accepted into an institutional structure during the seventeenth century has given way to the striving for individual fulfillment in today's society. This chest-over-drawer piece is a product of this contemporary thinking, which its themes and functioning reflect. *Private Life* is made with solid red oak, a domestic material that was typically used to make Hadley chests,⁴² and Milkpainted blue around the chest body with decorative etchings across the façade. To protect the paint and provide warmth to the wood, this piece is finished in the oil-based urethane product,

General Finishes Seal-A-Cell. It is a tabletop piece, made intimate in scale (only 14" high) to promote more thoughtful use. With this intention in mind, its two front legs are visibly shorter than its back legs, causing the piece to rest in a forward-tipping position, as though aimed at the viewer and about to fall open. Because it is modeled on Hadley chests, its form is familiar, with a common frame and panel construction, and in keeping with the tradition of dating the work, the year "2006" is also etched and painted in the center of the top panel; but its familiarity ends here. Across the chest façade, caricatures derived from the Kama Sutra practice are etched and Milkpainted white into the blue base color (see Plate 15). This imagery is uncharacteristic by design. It is intended to surprise, perhaps even to shock. A viewer may consider these sexual depictions a modern translation of the tulip-and-leaf motif into our current language of social values. In our time, our culture struggles with what limits to place upon sexual behavior and even with its very definitions. To see sex portrayed upon a piece of household furniture challenges our common conception of the role of that furniture in the typical home. Even with the limits of acceptable sexual behavior wavering in popular culture, for many people those limits remain clear: Sex is an intimate and private act. Oddly, it is curious that a room full of strangers is comfortable witnessing others perform depictions of sex in the context of a film, in which a theater's darkness creates only a semi-private environment. *Private Life* attempts to confront these social inconsistencies with the question: What should be kept private?

Interacting with this piece reveals more of its provocative narrative. In its resting position, a viewer will see the lid of the chest closed and the drawer below open. The viewer that opens the lid to see inside will quickly discover that as the lid is lifted, the drawer draws closed. The inverse effect is also true: when the lid is closed, the drawer will then move open. Further, because the drawer intentionally has no pulls, it cannot be operated independently: In this chest-over-drawer piece, the lid and the drawer are mechanically linked. Between the front and back legs of the chest, two encased cavities contain the pivoting steel armatures that functionally link the lid and drawer. What's more, the interior chest space has no bottom panel, which means that a viewer, upon opening the lid, will see down into the closed drawer. The result is that the drawer and its contents can never be hidden from view—its expected function is physically defied. This perpetually public drawer puts the unwitting viewer in the position of voyeur, as though viewing into someone else's private affairs (see Plate 13). For the thoughtful viewer, this privacy narrative may stir him to consider his own sense of comfort with privacy in American society.

IV. A Critique and a Reflection upon Expectations

A. Critique of *Narrative Drawers: Reconsidering Familiar Precedents of Drawer Furniture*

Each unique attempt at making is in danger of failing, but whether it fails in the end is, arguably, not the most important issue; the experience of making, the process, is perhaps what matters most to the studio maker. Of course, without a reasonable sense of accomplishment, a maker may not choose to continue the process itself. Likewise, the work must exhibit, and it must be accomplished enough to do so, or it risks becoming irrelevant. And no doubt, for a professional furniture maker, the work must sell, so product is an essential condition of making. Nonetheless, the experience of learning and growing while making must be, for all studio makers, the dominant motivator, a sentiment that also applies to this thesis. Each piece in *Narrative Drawers: Reconsidering Familiar Precedents of Drawer Furniture* reaffirmed my love for making furniture; however, though I greatly enjoy each individual piece, I consider the body of work and exhibition to be strained for cohesiveness. This occurs partly because each piece is visually distinct from its fellow works, making it a more challenging show to view; but it also results from a loss of focused attention toward the exhibition's themes. Even still, I feel a great sense of personal success in making these works together for a single exhibition. I enjoy the way that humor helps to bind these pieces together. Ultimately, each new piece led me toward a greater understanding of my intentions and expanded my technical and creative vocabularies. In short, I learned and I grew. Considered in these terms, it is a success.

With that said, it is now worth considering the weaknesses of this thesis exhibit as well. I must begin by reiterating the criterion for a cohesive body of work, as I outlined in Section I of this writing:

The works would ideally show a focused intent, a consistent conceptual or thematic significance, a unity of material approaches or techniques, or perhaps a commonality in collective appearances. The various pieces of work should exist together for a determined reason, and that reason should be transparent to many who view the body together; in other words, it should have relevance, without which the effort may simply be hollow and self-indulgent.

Ultimately, the collected work should capture a clear vision of the maker at that given moment.

A viewer of *Narrative Drawers* might see some of the visual similarities between these pieces: drawer variations, an inclination toward functional and historical subversion, and decorative paint details. This sense of visual cohesion might gradually piece together in a viewer's mind, as visual impressions thread together. But when that viewer continues her thoughtful viewing, the themes of this exhibition could naturally emerge, thereby connecting these four pieces into a complete body of work. It is this conceptual, thematic point of view, as opposed to a visual one, that enables a greater correlation between the works. Unfortunately, this point of view is more difficult to achieve. It is less immediate and requires more dedication from a viewer. Certainly these works demonstrate both functional and cultural relevance to our time and place, as described in Section III of this writing, and they are created and shown together for a "determined reason"—it's just that the reason is not immediately clear between the four pieces. It takes work to resolve. In this way, I might suggest that this body of work fails the test of cohesion.

The lack of transparency is, in the end, a failure of my intentions. I entered into this thesis process expecting that my intentions would grow as my ideas developed. I began to formulate my thesis proposal with broad ideas, as is my tendency, hoping to whittle this broad block down into a more refined form: a core proposal. The challenge of such a process is in refining the proposal enough so that the resulting furniture work can grow from a clear point of view. I had structured my proposal as a challenge to "the archetypes of containment furniture," but, really, I needed to stab at it with some randomness to really find out how it could, or even should, be approached. And the resulting work reflects this sprawling approach. My thesis proposal outlines only one initial investigation, with "continuing investigations" to follow, but I now see clearly how more control over my subject would greatly improve my work's cohesiveness and clarity. Any one of my four furniture pieces might have lead a strong investigation into its particular subject, but instead these pieces take a wider view of their central subjects. In the defense of my process, I prefer not to repeat myself as I make, choosing to expand upon and, even, diverge from my subjects with each new endeavor. This approach allows designing and making to remain fresh and my interest to stay sharp. Building a visually cohesive body of work is less appealing to me than attempting a thematically cohesive one. This process, however, requires a more dedicated intention if its clarity is to be controlled.

Ultimately, I wanted the work to develop naturally rather than being forced to fit, which meant that each new piece might grow in unplanned directions. I wanted this work to lead me wherever it might need, all the while attempting to maintain a consistency of intent. Eventually, however, some of the work did deviate, owing to an uncertain point of view, perhaps even to an unwillingness to commit to a more determinate concept. The concepts of *Narrative Drawers* grew partly as the work was made, from the starting vision until the work's completion, rather than from a completed forethought. Concepts grew from concepts, and one piece evolved from the last. These four works did not grow together in hopes of forming a visually cohesive body, like a field full of flowers, where each one is a variant on a single, unified species; rather, each piece formed independently from the overall themes, one after the other, like four individual and separate, species cohabitating within the same ecosystem. And that is the point: they did not conflict, but rather, cohabitated. They complimented one another, and provided clues into the narratives and themes of each other. Overall, I remain pleased with my experience of creating and showing these four works together.

After seeing this body of work together in its gallery environment, I possess new insights into its successes and weaknesses. These four works were composed in a cross-pattern within a space in the Bevier Gallery (see Plate 16). The upside-down *Tradition* sat opposite the chest-over-drawer piece, *Private Life*, while *Perforated Chest of Drawers* lay across from a wall that supported *Private Exhibition* and its clothes pegs. This arrangement was successful in allowing an easy visual comparison of these works, but also in quickly revealing the piece with the least cohesive qualities, the one that cohabitated the poorest, so to speak. Of all these works, *Private Exhibition* relates the weakest to the concepts of this thesis and demands the most work to resolve with this body of work, both visually and functionally. The familiar nature of some of its components, such as the clothes pegs and commercial drawer slides, may help a viewer gain a foothold in understanding the piece, but these parts sit within a novel, untested form of furniture—the piece lacks for obvious precedents to be compared with. This approach differs from the one used to develop the other three pieces, which adhered to conceptual explorations of recognizable, historically grounded forms as points of reference. In my desire to explore narratives of concealment and privacy, I lost track of the more binding themes involving historical precedents and functional subversion. Perhaps if this piece had derived from a more concise reference, an actual historical example, then it might have enabled a stronger,

more coherent response to the questions and concepts explored by the thesis work. It might also have helped to improve its visual and thematic cohesiveness.

Of the other pieces, both *Tradition* and *Perforated Chest of Drawers* are the most direct in their presentations, quickly conveying their narratives and themes, but they also risk being viewed as simplistic one-liners. Nonetheless, their presentations are strong, complimenting and supporting one another within the exhibition context. Their particular subversive devices directly relate to the historical periods and precedents from which they draw: *Tradition* defies the accepted convention of uprightness in an eighteenth century Queen Anne style chest of drawers, and *Perforated Chest of Drawers* subverts the efficient simplicity of Modernism with holes in the drawer case. These different approaches can both be easily understood and their intentions clearly deciphered by a typical viewer, aided by the humor inherent to these two pieces. Additionally, these works gain much through their proximity to one another in the gallery context, sharing visual cues and enhancing their common themes.

Private Life is the most successful in connecting the varied themes across this body of work. This piece alone binds the other three together: Its treatment of historical precedent is consistent with the thematic approach to *Tradition* and *Perforated Chest of Drawers*; its narrative, focusing on privacy invasion, threads through both *Perforated Chest of Drawers* and *Private Exhibition*; the use of surface decoration in *Private Life* appears in similar fashion in *Private Exhibition* and *Tradition*; and lastly, the subversion of functional expectations weaves through all four pieces in various incarnations. None of the other three pieces in this thesis combine all four themes as coherently as *Private Life*. It is like the pivot point around which the others revolve, and it contains the greatest surprise, as well: The fixed operation of the lid with the drawer defies the functional precedent by moving together. With this piece, the themes and concepts finally interconnected, and I am especially pleased with result. It is the start of a more mature, developed conception of furniture making, where higher concept meets finished form with clarity.

Understanding the strengths, the weaknesses, and the sprawling approach to this body of work clarifies that I need a more focused approach in developing my work—cohesiveness depends upon it. In *Narrative Drawers* too many themes and too many styles are present. All the diverse components at some point begin to act against each other and undermine the work's principal intentions. This sprawl of ideas requires too much effort from a viewer to be able to bind them together easily, which could potentially leave a viewer unsatisfied with his experience of the work. My creative tendency is to diverge and

wander along various conceptual paths of interest, thereby losing the cohesive momentum gained from building ideas upon ideas. Nonetheless, I enjoy the notion of discovering one's work as it evolves, allowing for accidents and discoveries to freely occur through the making process; focusing that freedom is paramount. Defining more specific conceptual parameters for my craft, while working to maintain a playful openness, appears to be my greatest challenge in developing a lucid and relevant body of work. I must identify the issues that I am most intrigued by early in the process and mold these into focused and cohesive themes.

B. Expectations of How This Exhibition Will Lead to Future Work

The mistakes made in the cohesive design of this exhibition will surely inform my future understanding of the process of building a body of work. A more evolved clarity of intention and the concise editing of concepts will measure more heavily into my future endeavors. If nothing else, this work gives me several strong directions which I might continue pursuing. I greatly enjoyed developing work from historical sources, in which the best representative examples and the occasional, odd regional piece outline the precedents of a style. I find early American furniture, particularly the elegant Queen Anne style, ripe with deeply enduring qualities of craft and narrative content, which appeal to my interest in conceptualizing contemporary issues through a historical lens. I enjoy that furniture, like any other craft form, can serve as a means of social expression in addition to its treatment of functional issues. It is natural, then, that my future expressions will likely continue with narratives about the very nature of furniture itself—furniture about furniture. It is also likely that I will cast my furniture pieces as anthropomorphic stand-ins for my own body, shaping personal concepts from furniture archetypes. Lastly, I would like to further develop the decorative concepts that began with this thesis work, particularly creating fabric patterns as surface covers, like the drawer liner in *Tradition*, and making paint and etching treatments, as in *Private Life* and *Private Exhibition*.

I remain dedicated to furniture making in the studio context. Wood will remain my primary material as I continue striving for a greater understanding of its qualities and

potential. Though the pull of contemporary furniture design shows is great—where contemporary production and commercial concepts reach retail markets, and I may yet develop work in that direction—I am devoted to studio making. Making original, one-of-a-kind designs myself will always drive my efforts. Moving ahead in my career, I foresee that commissions will become a necessary source of income, and, hopefully, an asset in my personal pursuits as well. Furthermore, I intend to continue to weave myself into a community of other like-minded individuals who love to make. As much as I can, I intend to lend my voice to dedicated craft organizations in helping to create a positive cultural context for my own and for my peer's work. I do not intend to work in a solitary vacuum but within a community, and to behave otherwise would only be to limit my potential.

Plates

Plate 1. *Tradition* (Cherry, brass, paper, linen, ink; 22" x 17 3/16" x 39 3/4" high).



Plate 2. *Tradition*, detail.



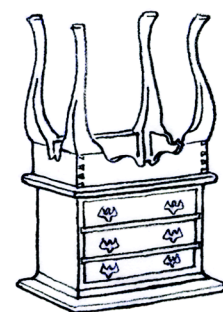
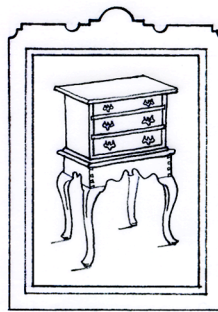
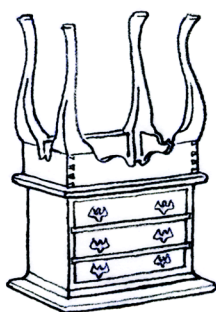
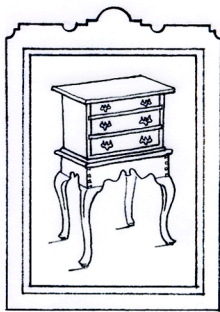
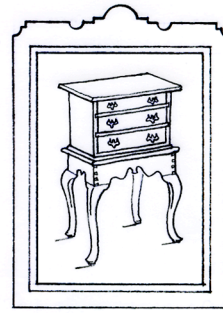
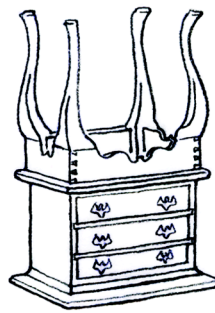
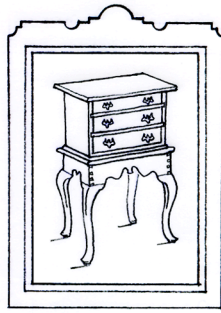
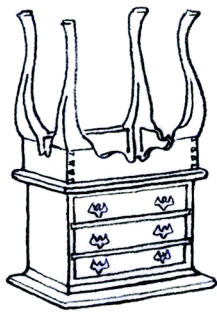
Plates 3 & 4. *Tradition*, drawer detail.

Plate 5. *Perforated Chest of Drawers* (Walnut, plywood, aluminum, locksets; 27 1/2" x 17 3/8" x 38 7/8" high).



Plates 6 & 7. *Perforated Chest of Drawers*, detail.



Plate 8. *Private Exhibition* (Maple, commercial drawer slides, steel, acrylic paint; 23 3/4" x 15" x 76" high).



Plate 9. *Private Exhibition.*



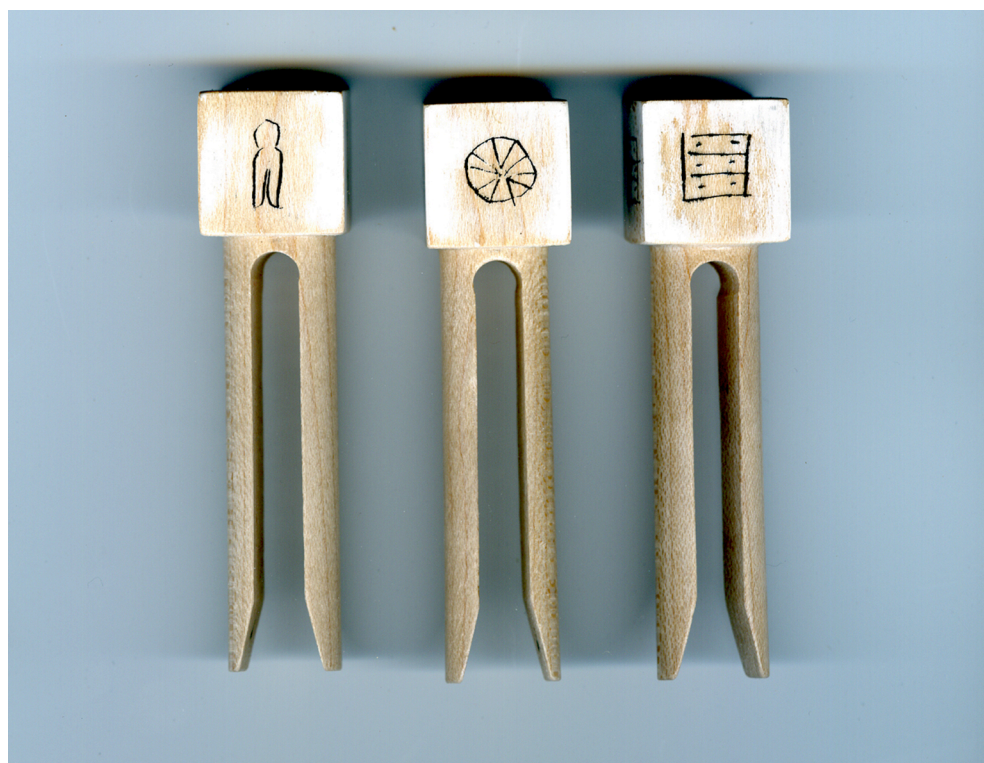
Plates 10 & 11. *Private Exhibition*, detail.

Plate 12. *Private Life* (Red oak, steel, Milkpaint; 21 1/2" x 17 3/8" x 14" high).



Plate 13. *Private Life*.

Plates 14 & 15. *Private Life*, detail.

Plate 16. *Narrative Drawers: Reconsidering Familiar Precedents of Drawer Furniture*, exhibition, 2006.

Bevier Gallery, Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, New York.



Notes

¹ Yann Martel. "Author's Note." *Life of Pi* (Orlando: Harcourt Inc., 2001). p. xii.

2 David E. Adams, *The Cultural Identity of Furniture Making: A Graduate Research Project*. 2005. The results of this study are currently unpublished—a copy may be found in the archives of The Center for Craft, Creativity and Design in Hendersonville, North Carolina.

With the aid of a 2005 Graduate Research Grant from the Center for Craft, Creativity and Design—a regional center of the University of North Carolina and a crafts support organization, located in Hendersonville, near Asheville, North Carolina—I developed this research project, created a questionnaire, and traveled to several different locations and furniture shows across the country to gather the opinions of furniture makers on the following subject: How do furniture makers view their own identities and how do they cope with the current cultural perception of their profession and work? I am one of four recipients of a 2005 Graduate Research Grant. Grants were given to both graduate proposals and professional proposals with the purpose of assisting in the advancement of scholarship in the field of American craft. One hundred and fifty total respondents answered my questionnaire. This research was completed August 16, 2006.

3 To read more on this development in the history of studio crafts, see Edward S. Cooke, et al. "The Challenge of Freewheeling Artist-Craftsmen: Tradition and Innovation in the 1960s." *The Maker's Hand: American Studio Furniture, 1940 – 1990* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts Publications, First Edition, 1989). p. 39-40. Also see Glenn Adamson. "Material." *Thinking Through Craft* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2007). pp. 40-67.

4 View John Eric Byers' website: *John Eric Byers*. Web. Accessed August 29, 2009. <<http://www.johnericbyers.com/>>.
Also see Gallery NAGA. Web. Accessed August 29, 2009. <<http://www.gallerynaga.com/artists/byers/byers.html>>.

5 View Judy Kensley McKie's work: *Gallery NAGA*. Web. Accessed August 29, 2009. <<http://www.gallerynaga.com/artists/kensleymckie/kensleymckie.html>>.

6 View Roy McMakin's website: *Domestic Furniture*. Web. Accessed August 28, 2009. <<http://www.domesticfurniture.com/>>.

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11 See Edward S. Cooke, et al. *The Maker's Hand: American Studio Furniture, 1940 – 1990* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts Publications, 1989).

12 See Glenn Adamson. *Thinking Through Craft* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2007).

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16 The textbook is titled *Makers: A History of American Studio Craft*: "2010 Update." Center for Craft, Creativity and Design. Web. Accessed July 3, 2010. <<http://www.craftcreativitydesign.org/research/history.php>>.

17 View the documentary project's website: *Craft in America*. Web. Accessed September 29, 2009. <<http://www.craftinamerica.org>>.

18 Edward S. Cooke. "End notes." *New American Furniture: The Second Generation of Studio Furnituremakers* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts Publications, First Edition, 1989) p.28.

19 Adams. "Methods." *The Cultural Identity of Furniture Making: A Graduate Research Project*. pp. 20–26.

20 David Pye. *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* (Cambium Press, Revised edition, 1968). pp. 18-19.

21 Cooke, et al. "The Challenge of Freewheeling Artist-Craftsmen: Tradition and Innovation in the 1960s." *The Maker's Hand: American Studio Furniture, 1940 – 1990*. pp. 39-40.

22 Philip Zea and Suzanne Flint. *Hadley Chests* exhibition catalogue (Deerfield, Massachusetts: Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, 1992). pp. 3, 17.

23 "The successful people of the 18th century were expected to be part of a polite society that exuded grace, charm, self-confidence and poise—and all without apparent effort. This extended to their furnishings as well, which were chosen to reinforce and testify to the refinement of their owners. Fine furnishings were less a display of wealth than the

accouterments of an elegant life.” Jeffery P. Greene. *American Furniture of the 18th Century* (Newtown, Connecticut: The Taunton Press, 1996). p. 34.

24 Virginia T. Boyd. “Doors, Drawers, and Cases.” *Contemporary Studio Case Furniture: The Inside Story* exhibition catalogue. By Virginia T. Boyd and Glenn Adamson (Madison: Elvehjem Museum of Art, 2002). p. 29.

25 Wendy Maruyama, John Smith, and Penny Smith. *Convergence: Crossing the Divide, The Studio Furniture of Tasmania and America* exhibition catalogue (Oceanside Museum of Art, San Francisco Museum of Craft + Design, Furniture Society, 2005). p. 44.

26 Cooke, et al. “The Challenge of Freewheeling Artist-Craftsmen: Tradition and Innovation in the 1960s.” *The Maker’s Hand: American Studio Furniture, 1940 – 1990*. pp. 39-40.

27 “The power of his past in the small towns of the Midwest is manifested in forms that draw on such traditional vernacular furniture as Windsor chairs, four-poster beds, and the fragmented images of happy dreams. Although most viewers imagine rather than remember such a past, the sweetness and delight his pieces elicit testify to the universality of such a vision. Firsts recalls the common pie safe with punched tin panels to let air flow as baked goods cooled.” Boyd. *Contemporary Studio Case Furniture: The Inside Story*. By Virginia T. Boyd and Glenn Adamson. p. 65.

28 “Toronto’s Gord Peteran has launched a boundary-crossing career, opening up the category of furniture to an unprecedented range of psychological and conceptual content. Sometimes his means are disarmingly simple: his work ‘A Table Made of Wood’ was cobbled together from scraps on his workshop floor. ...In all cases, Peteran’s work addresses the traditional role of furniture while at the same time subverting it.” Christina Dittrich, ed. “Furniture That Crosses Boundaries: Currents 32– Gord Peteran: Furniture Meets Its Maker.” *Milwaukee Art Museum*. October 1, 2006. Web. Accessed February 27, 2010. <<http://www.mam.org/info/pressroom/2006/10/furniture-that-crosses-boundaries-currents-32--gord-peteran-furniture-meets-its-maker/>>.

29 In his book *Postmodern Sophistications*, writer David Kolb articulates the perspectives of many thinkers and philosophers on their essential definition of Postmodernism. The following quote represents a common perspective:

"Some who talk about postmodern architecture speak as if with the modernist barriers down we can roam freely through the past, taking historical allusions and forms from where we will for our double coding or ironic enjoyment. The fall of the modernist prohibition against historical reference coincides with a new world where history is available but we are not restricted by the premodern traditions. We, in our self-consciousness, can use all of history as our material."

David Kolb. *Postmodern Sophistications: Philosophy, Architecture, and Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, Paperback edition, 1992). p. 103. Kolb's phrasing essentially matches how architect and architectural historian Charles Jencks describes the term in his masterwork, *Post-Modernism*:

"Most important are the ideas of relating our efforts to those of the past, and using universal figures of representation, or previously discovered constants of a language.... Thus the new classicism has appeared partly because those creating it have rediscovered necessity: the fact that if archetypes and universals are inevitable, they might as well be consciously articulated or turned into a representational art.... Post-Modernists...choose to celebrate these perennial concerns, thereby creating a dialogue with history."

Charles Jencks. *Post-Modernism: The New Classicism in Art and Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications Inc., 1987). p. 317.

30 Ursula Ilse-Meuman. *John Eric Byers* exhibition catalogue (New York: John Elder Gallery, 2001). p. 7.

31 "Trotman uses the drawer to express nuances about White Guy's alienation from much in his world. The various drawers extend through the entire sculpture, the drawer in the arm extends from elbow to elbow, for example. If we could see through to the hollow inside, we would see the several drawers move silently and separately by each other over the years, the contents never connecting, just as the parts of White Guy's life remain unconnected." Boyd. *Contemporary Studio Case Furniture: The Inside Story*. p. 69.

32 "Thomas Loeser creates complex puzzlelike internal compartments through constructing drawers within drawers. His cases often have a hierarchy of interior spaces that the user must discover and follow in sequence in order to use the drawers. Loeser prompts one to rethink the role of drawers; are they simply the entry from outside to inside, functional receptacles, or mechanisms for engineering complex spatial structures?" Boyd. "Doors, Drawers, and Cases." *Contemporary Studio Case Furniture: The Inside Story*. p. 25.

33 From the description of a high chest of drawers, Boston, 1740 - 50: "Japanned maple and pine. This masterpiece in the American Queen Anne style was built by Jon Pimm for Commodore Joshua Loring of Boston and painted in imitation of oriental lacquer probably by Thomas Johnson." Robert C. Smith. "America." *World Furniture*. Ed. Helena Hayward (London: Hamlyn Publishing Group, Ltd., 1973). p. 193.

34 Cooke, et al. "The Challenge of Freewheeling Artist-Craftsmen: Tradition and Innovation in the 1960s." *The Maker's Hand: American Studio Furniture, 1940 - 1990*. pp. 39-40.

35 View Jenna Goldberg's website: *Jenna Goldberg Studio*. Web. Accessed April 12, 2010. <<http://jennagoldbergstudio.com>>.

36 Byers. Web. Accessed August 29, 2009. <<http://www.johnericbyers.com/>>.

37 View Craig Nutt's website: *Craig Nutt*. Web. Accessed April 12, 2010. <<http://www.craignutt.com>>.

38 View Kim Kelzer's work: *Women in Woodworking*. Web. Accessed April 12, 2010. <<http://www.womeninwoodworking.com/gallery/KimKelzer.cfm>>.

39 One reference is the unattributed "Chest-on-frame" from Newport, Rhode Island, 1740 – 1760: Gerald W. R. Ward. *American Case Furniture in the Mabel Brady Garvan and Other Collections at Yale University*. (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1988). fig. 133, p. 256. Another good reference is an unattributed eighteenth century "Chest-on-frame" from the New England region: Ralph and Terry Kovel. *American Country Furniture 1780 – 1875* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1965). fig. 335, p. 137.

40 "According to the pro-clothesline Web site of Project Laundry List (www.laundrylist.org), operated by Alexander Lee of New Hampshire, nearly all the 35,000 homeowners' associations in California prohibit the use of clotheslines, which they consider unsightly." Anita Lahey. "The Better Clothespin." *Invention & Technology* (Fall 2006, Volume 22, Issue 2).

41 "As early as 1899, authors were writing about these as bridal chests, intended to be filled 'with a few of the precious things of that day ... a bundle of love letters may have long lain there, and little knitted socks and tinny baby linen....' ... We may never know, however, who contracted with the joiner for the chest (the father, parents, future spouse or someone else) and when in one's life a chest was made. In this patriarchal society, the gift of expensive, new joinery may well represent assets directed towards daughters in the way land, livestock and tools were invariably given to sons." Zea and Flint. *Hadley Chests*. p. 17.

42 "The popularity of the tulip-and-leaf motif and the sequence of tasks required to join a chest in western Massachusetts were shaped by cultural and economic conditions. For one thing, the chests were made of the same species of local woods. Most of the furniture built before 1715 was constructed of red or white oak (usually red) for the frame, visible panels and drawer facades and sides. Hard yellow pine or 'southern' pine was used for the bottoms of the carcass and drawers, back panels, and lids." Zea and Flint. *Hadley Chests*. p. 12.